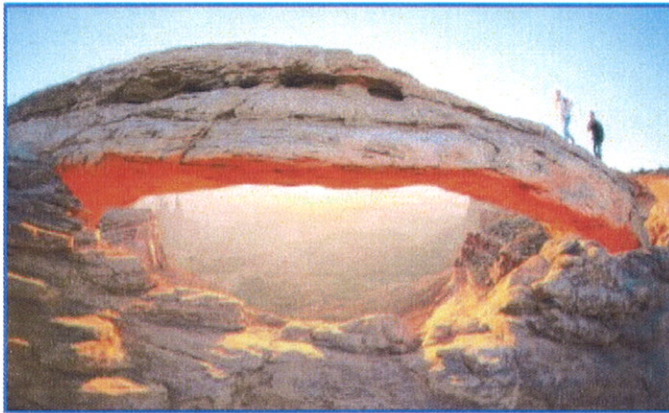


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Screen dreams in John Wayne country



[LONG WAY DOWN Mesa Arch, in Canyonlands National Park. Photograph: John Kelly/Image Bank/Getty](#)

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Utah has provided the backdrop for films from ‘Stagecoach’ to ‘Thelma Louise’. It’s a great place for an adventure, writes **GENEVIEVE CARBERY**

TUMBLEWEED ROLLS across the empty road. Nothing else stirs in the canyon or on the prairie around it. At any moment I expect to hear the whinny of a wild horse or the whistle of a lonesome cowboy, for Utah surely defines the Wild West.

Much of Utah sits atop the Colorado Plateau, and its sandstone formations bear the imprint of millions of years of erosion in dramatic, colourful beauty. These arches and canyons form the backdrop for an endless variety of walks, hikes and bike and horse trails in one of the state’s five national parks. When added to Native American culture and dinosaur fossils, this sparse state offers visitors many chances for adventure – you get all of the drama of the Grand Canyon without the crowds, the expense and the well-worn tourist paths.

This vast state just begs to be explored on a great American road trip. Scenic Byway 12, part of a circuit of 29 stretching from Las Vegas to Albuquerque and Salt Lake City, connects Canyonlands National Park with the equally dramatic Bryce and Zion parks, winding 200km along stepped cliffs.

Canyonlands, which is the biggest of the state’s parks, features hundreds of rock formation known as islands in the sky. Although most are hard to get close to without an arduous trek, it is just a short hike up to the hanging Mesa Arch, which offers spine-tingling views, especially at sunrise.

To the northeast is Arches National Park, home to Utah's state icon, the Delicate Arch. Once known as the Chaps, for its resemblance to a pair of cowboys legs, it stands at the edge of a bowl of red rock that looks slippery but gives you such grip that you feel like Spider-Man.

If you look through the arch you get a taste of the variety of Utah's landscape, from across the Colorado River canyon (popular for white-water rafting) to snow-topped mountain peaks (Utah claims to have the best snow on earth).

To relive, up to a point, that *Thelma & Louise* moment, with the wind in your hair and nowhere to go but down, head for nearby Dead Horse Point State Park, where the 1991 film was made. The park towers above the Colorado river and its expanse of empty canyons.

For more film sets – this time from westerns, and on a grand scale – Monument Valley is worth a stop, to see if you recognise backdrops from *Legend of the Lone Ranger* or even *Mission: Impossible III*. You can explore the Navajo-owned park with Native American guides, when private, quiet locals will explain the ancient (Tse' Bii' Ndzigaii) and not-so-ancient (via Alfred Hitchcock) names they give to the area and its odd-shaped mounds.

One of the only places to stay in the valley is Goulding's Lodge, which is integral to the area's big-screen history. Staff proudly tell the fascinating tale of how Harry and Leone Goulding – or Mike, as her husband called her, unable to spell her real first name – set off for Hollywood from their small trading post in the middle of this isolated and unknown valley.

When they arrived at the office of the director John Ford, they were told it would be days before he could see them. So Harry went back to his truck, got his blankets and explained that he didn't mind waiting. When a location manager spotted photographs of Monument Valley that Harry had spread on the waiting-room floor, he finally got a meeting. Ten days later the cast and crew arrived to make the valley's first film, *Stagecoach*, starring John Wayne.

Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks are the gems of the state. Hundreds of eerie hoodoos, or pillars of weathered rock, at Bryce Canyon look like ancient totem poles. As its name suggests, Zion is a lush green park alive with plant and animal life. On top of that, its ever-changing red cliffs are full of geological drama. The death-defying trek to Angel's Landing is thrilling, tough and unforgettable. The hike climbs three kilometres along switchback bends that lead to a narrow fin of rock some 800m high. Firmly fastened metal ropes are the only way to pull yourself up over the rocks. And don't look down: a sheer drop awaits below, and there have been a number of fatal falls on this trail. Stunning views down the green valley justify the nail-biting climb.

The dinosaurs that roamed across the state are well preserved as fossils. Bones are excavated daily, and more than a dozen museums of prehistory offer a chance to meet with and watch palaeontologists preparing dinosaur specimens. Most of the exhibits come from nearby digs, but some are bought at annual dinosaur- and fossil-trading shows. One local palaeontologist explained that dinosaur trading is big business, especially on eBay, where he has seen a full mammoth skeleton on sale for tens of thousands of dollars.

YOU SHOULD GET a warm welcome from Utah's mainly Mormon population (60 per cent are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints). Despite their strict religious restrictions on alcohol and tobacco, locals are very accepting of the habits of visitors – although even outsiders have to comply with the state's legal restrictions on alcohol, which have led to private clubs rather than pubs and require bartenders to mix drinks behind a barrier. According to another law, you have to finish one beer before starting another – which means knocking them back when the waiter comes to your table. You shouldn't get any disapproving looks when you order a drink, but somehow, when everyone else is extremely sober, it's hard not to feel a little guilty.

Mormons are quick to dispel the notion that they are polygamous – the practice has been illegal here since the 19th century and is continued only among fundamentalist sects.

Their attachment to family is nowhere better seen than at the Family History Library, which the Mormons run. Located in Salt Lake City, it contains the world's largest collection of genealogical records, gathered from 110

countries, including Ireland. Visitors can spend hours among dusty files, looking through microfiche and on computers for family secrets.

For a little Bohemianism in the midst of Utah's Mormon stoicism, stop off in Boulder. This quirky town claims to be the last community to receive its post by mule train. It is also home to the site of a 1,000-year-old Pueblo village. When the Pueblos revolted against the colonising Spanish, in 1680, the organiser sent a knotted cord to each tribe. They would untie one knot each day; when they undid the last one they knew it was time to rebel. The Puebloans forced the Spanish to retreat, then held them off for 70 years.

Utah is a jewel that doesn't tend to feature on glossy travel brochures, but its empty canyons, wind-whipped arches and endless prairies make the state's imposing landscape an invitation to get lost in an adventure.

* Genevieve Carbery was a guest of Utah Office of Tourism (www.utah.travel) and Aer Lingus

Where to stay, eat and go in Utah

Where to stay

Zion Mountain Ranch. East Highway 9, Zion National Park, 00-1-866-6482555, www.zionmountainresort.com. To unwind and experience the quiet cowboy life for a few days, this unique ranch has all-American wood cabins, horseback riding and a herd of buffalo. Cabins from €90.

Goulding's Lodge. Monument Valley, 00-1-435- 7273231, www.gouldings.com. This lodge is a piece of Utah's Hollywood history. Book in advance for plain rooms with stunning desert sunrise views. Double rooms from €160.

Ruby's Inn. 26 South Main, Bryce Canyon City, 00-1-435- 8345341, www.rubysinn.com. This well-run inn is an oasis, with a supermarket, impressive gift shop and decent food. Double rooms from €98.

Cable Mountain Lodge. 147 Zion Park Boulevard, Springdale, 00-1-435-7723366, www.cablemountainlodge.com. This luxurious lodge provides plush self-catering accommodation. Double lodges from €140.

Canyonlands Inn. 16 South Main Street, Moab, 00-1-435-2592300, www.canyonlands.inn.com. Spacious rooms and lots of extra luxuries. Double rooms from €107.

Where to eat

Sundance Resort. 8841 North Alpine Loop Road, Sundance, 00-1-801-2254107, www.sundanceresort.com. Don't miss the chance to eat or stay in Robert Redford's exquisite resort. Or just have a drink at Butch Cassidy's bar.

Hell's Backbone Grill. 20 North Highway 12, Boulder, 00-1-435-3357464, www.hellsbackbonegrill.com. Award-winning restaurant offering a mix of western and Native American food.

Moab Brewery. 686 South Main Street, Moab, 00-1-435- 2596333, www.themoab.brewery.com. This microbrewery is good for simple grub and ale.

Oscars. 948 Zion Park Boulevard, Springdale, 00-1-435-772-3232, www.cafeoscars.com. Just outside Zion park, this fun restaurant has friendly staff and good Mexican-style food.

Where to go

Canyonlands National Park. Moab, 00-1-435-7192313, www.nps.gov/cany.

Bryce Canyon National Park. Bryce, 00-1-435-8345322, www.nps.gov/brca.

Zion National Park. Springdale, 00-1-435-7723256, www.nps.gov/zion.

Arches National Park. Moab, 00-1-435-7192299, www.nps.gov/arch.

Dead Horse Point State Park. Moab, 00-1-435-2592614, www.utah.com/stateparks/dead_horse.htm.

Grand Circle scenic byways. www.grandcircle.org.

Family History Museum. 35 North West Temple Street, Salt Lake City, 00-1-866-4061830, www.familysearch.org.

Thanksgiving Point Museum of Ancient Life. 3003 North Thanksgiving Way, Lehi, 00-1-801-7665030, www.thanksgivingpoint.com.

Anasazi State Park Museum (Puebloan village). 460 North Highway 12, Boulder, 00-1-435-3357308, www.utah.com/stateparks/anasazi.htm.

Go there

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) flies from Dublin and Shannon to Chicago and San Francisco, from where you can connect to Salt Lake City. Delta (www.delta.com) flies via New York or Atlanta. American Airlines (www.americanairlines.ie) and United (www.unitedairlines.co.uk) fly via Chicago. Aer Lingus also flies to Las Vegas, three hours by road from Zion National Park.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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